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<i>Module Code:</i> SICH4007 <i>Module title:</i> Sinological English I: A History of Chinese Classical Scholarship	<i>Student number:</i> 2304057
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The Evolution of Connotations of “Zhong 中” in the Opening Chapter of the *Doctrine of the Mean*

--From Ritual Norm to Human Nature and Heavenly Principle

Introduction

“Zhong” is one of the core concepts in *the Doctrine of the Mean*. Throughout the text, the word “zhong” has diverse meanings and referential scopes, sometimes referring to the virtue of a gentleman and sometimes to the appropriateness of handling affairs. Only the “zhong” in the three sentences of the opening chapter: “When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this “the center” (zhong 中).”¹ “The center is the great foundation of the world.”² “Reach the “center (zhong 中)” and “harmony” and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow.”³ These three sentences focus specifically on joy, anger, sorrow and happiness, the “zhong” of one’s inner temperament. Current scholarly interpretation of this term “zhong” remain divided, lacking a detailed classification analysis. Therefore, this paper excludes other uses of “zhong” in the text, and confines its analysis only to the “zhong” in the inner temperament.

Based on the annotations and commentaries of past dynasties, this paper examines the interpretations of Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda and Zhu Xi, and clarifies the shifting focuses of their understandings of the “zhong” in temperament. Their interpretations correspond to three distinct layers: “zhong” as ritual norm, “zhong” as human nature, and then “zhong” as heavenly principle. Through this analysis, we can further observe that from Han Dynasty to Song Dynasty, scholars’ interpretations of the “zhong” in temperament have evolved from external ritual norm to inner human nature, and finally to the Heavenly Principle and the Mandate of Heaven.

¹ When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this “the center” (zhong 中). 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中。

² The center is the great foundation of the world. 中也者，天下之大本也。

³ Reach the “center (zhong 中)” and “harmony” and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow. 致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。

1. The “Zhong” of Zheng Xuan’s External Ritual Norm

In *Zhongyong zhu* 中庸注, Zheng Xuan did not provide a direct meaning explanation for the phrase “When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this “the center” (zhong 中).”⁴ Instead, his annotation particularly emphasized the political and teaching and normative status of the term “zhong”.

The phrase “The center is the great foundation of the world”⁵ indicates the status of “zhong”, Zheng Xuan argued that “zhong” is the great foundation because it restrains joy, anger, sorrow and happiness; it is the source of *li* 禮. Government and teaching naturally come out of this.⁶ He pointed out that the ritual and propriety originated from “zhong”, and “zhong” was the source and basis of external rituals. For the phrase “Reach the “center” and “harmony” and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow.”⁷ *Zhi* 致 is to achieve something through actions. *Wei* 位 is like *zheng* 正 (correct, true). *Yu* 育 equates with *sheng* 生 (to be born, arise) and *zhang* 長 (to grow).⁸ Zheng Xuan understood “zhi” as achieving something through practice. Therefore, “Reach the “center”(zhizhong 致中)”⁹ means implementing the ritual system and political teaching, so as to restore the proper position of heaven and earth, that is, to maintain the normal order of heaven and earth, and to ensure that all things can find their proper places and develop and grow normally.

Thus, as Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞 (1850-1908) recorded in his *History of Classical Scholarship*, Han scholars wish to master the classics for practical application.¹⁰ For Han Confucian scholar

⁴ When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this “the center” (zhong 中). 喜怒哀樂之未發謂之中。

Zheng Xuan did not provide an explicit gloss on this sentence.

⁵ The center is the great foundation of the world. 中也者，天下之大本也。

⁶ Shisanjing zhushu zhengli weiyuanhui 十三經注疏整理委員會, *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義 (Beijing: Beijing Daxue chubanshe, 2000), p. 1662.

“Zhong” is the great foundation because it restrains joy, anger, sorrow and happiness; it is the source of *li* 禮. Government and teaching naturally come out of this. 中為大本者，以其含喜怒哀樂，禮之所由生，政教自此出也。

⁷ Reach the “center (zhong 中)” and “harmony” and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow. 致中和，天地位焉，萬物育焉。

⁸ *Liji Zhengyi*, p. 1662.

According to Zheng Xuan’s interpretation, *Wei* 位 is like *zheng* 正 (correct, true). *Yu* 育 equates with *sheng* 生 (to be born, arise) and *zhang* 長 (to grow). 致，行之至也。位，正也。育，生也，長也。

⁹ Reach the “center” (zhizhong 致中), this paper does not discuss the term “harmony (*he* 和)”.

¹⁰ According to Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞 (1850-1908), *Jingxue lishi* 經學歷史 (JXCS ed.), there is a sentence that “Scholars who first read these three works and deeply ponder their meanings will realize that the value of Han

Zheng Xuan, his interpretation of the “zhong” in temperament centers on expounding the classical meanings based on the ritual system. It is an emphasis on the external implementation of etiquette systems, linking the “zhong” in the opening chapter with etiquette and politics, which is precisely the embodiment of applying the classics to practice and interpreting the classics through etiquette.

2. The “Zhong” of Kong Yingda’s Inner Human Nature.

Kong Yingda of the Tang Dynasty inherited Zheng Xuan’s earlier annotations, there was no obvious difference in the exegesis of words and characters. However, in his interpretation of meanings and principles, he had already turned to the interpretation of the heart and human nature.

For the phrase “When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this ‘the center’ (zhong 中).” In *Liji Zhengyi* 禮記正義, there is a definition of “zhong”, Kong Yingda stated that this says that joy and anger, sorrow and happiness arise because of matters. At a time when they have not yet arisen, when there is tranquility and abstraction, the mind-heart has nothing to think about and is properly in accord with principle (*Li* 理). Therefore, we call this “zhong”.¹¹ Here, the principle refers to the common sense of things. Kong believed that “zhong” is a state of heart when joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, the heart is pure and in accordance with common sense.

For the phrase “The center is the great foundation of the world”, Kong Yingda explained: this says that when emotions and desires have not yet arisen, this is the first foundation of a person’s nature. Therefore, it is called the world’s great foundation.¹² Compared with Zheng Xuan, Kong Yingda no longer associated “zhong” with ritual system and political teaching, but believed that before emotions and desires are expressed, it is human nature. And he pointed that joy, anger, sorrow and happiness are emotions and desires, before these emotions

scholarship lies in its depth rather than breadth. If one wishes to master the classics for practical application, one should first seek grand principles and subtle teachings. 漢學所以有用者在精而不在博，將欲通經致用，先求大義微言，以視章句訓詁之學。”

¹¹ *Liji Zhengyi*, p. 1663.

This says that joy and anger, sorrow and happiness arise because of matters. At a time when they have not yet arisen, when there is tranquility and abstraction, the mind-heart has nothing to think about and is properly in accord with principle (*Li* 理). Therefore, we call this “zhong”. 言喜怒哀樂緣事而生，未發之時，澹然虛靜，心無所慮而當於理，故謂之中。

¹² *Liji Zhengyi*, p. 1663.

This says that when emotions and desires have not yet arisen, this is the first foundation of a person’s nature. Therefore, it is called the world’s great foundation. 言情慾未發，是人性初本，故曰：天下之大本也。

arise, our hearts remain tranquil. This state is the foundation of human nature, and is therefore called the great foundation of world. Here, Kong Yingda introduced the heart and human nature, although he didn't make a clear exegesis of the term "human nature".

For the sentence "Reach the "center" and "harmony" and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow." Kong Yingda's understanding is basically based on Zheng Xuan's exegesis of words and characters, and the core understanding of the entire sentence is similar to the Han scholar Zheng Xuan.

Therefore, apart from consensus on the basic interpretation of words and characters, Tang Dynasty scholar Kong Yingda's interpretation of "zhong" didn't follow the political teaching and ritual system which was emphasized by the Han Dynasty. Compared with Zheng Xuan, Kong shifted from the external ritual to the internal human heart and human nature, and he pointed out the significance of human nature and believed that "zhong" is human nature which is the foundation of the world. This is also a concrete manifestation of the understanding of the "zhong" in temperament from outside to the inside during the Han and Tang Dynasty.

3. Zhu Xi's Understanding of "Zhong" as Heavenly Principle

Building on Kong Yingda's shift of the "zhong" in temperament from external propriety to internal human nature, Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi made further theoretical breakthroughs and pushed his interpretation into the level of Mandate of Heaven and Heavenly Principle, linking with heaven.

For the phrase "When joy, anger, sorrow and happiness have not yet arisen, we call this "the center" (zhong 中)." In *Sishu Jizhu* 四書集注, Zhu Xi said: "Joy, anger, sorrow and happiness, they are emotions. When they have not yet arisen, this is nature. There is no deviation, thus called "zhong"."¹³ And Zhu Xi basically inherited Kong Yingda's definition of emotions and human nature. And "zhong" means no deviation, also referring to the state before emotions are expressed.

For the sentence "The center (zhong) is the great foundation of the world", Zhu Xi annotated: "the great foundation, both the nature of the Mandate of Heaven and the Principle of Heaven

¹³ Zhu Xi 朱熹, *Sishu jizhu* 四書集注 (Taipei: Shijie shuju, 1956), p. 26.

Joy, anger, sorrow and happiness, they are emotions. When they have not yet arisen, this is nature. There is no deviation, thus called "zhong". 喜怒哀樂，情也，其未發，則性也。無所偏移故謂之中。

come from it.”¹⁴ Compared with Zheng Xuan and Kong Yingda, Zhu Xi didn’t interpret it from the perspectives of ritual and only human nature, but introduced two core concepts which are “the nature of the Mandate of Heaven” and “the Principle of Heaven”. That means the origin of all things is “zhong”, elevating the “zhong” in temperament to a higher realm. And Zhu Xi believed that “zhong” is the source of Heavenly Principle, although he didn’t clearly define this abstract concept of the Heavenly Principle in this annotation. In addition, this is in line with the academic atmosphere of the Song Dynasty, which emphasized the principles.¹⁵

In the interpretation of the phrase “Reach the “center” and “harmony” and Heaven and Earth are in their proper positions and the ten thousand things will be born and grow.” Apart from the similar exegesis of the words and characters to the previous dynasty, Zhu Xi added: “the heaven and earth and all of the things actually are the whole with us, if one’s heart is in proper order, the heart of heaven and earth also maintains its proper order.”¹⁶ Here, Zhu Xi explicitly unified the human with the heaven and earth, connecting the human and heaven, and proving that the origin of all things is “zhong”.

Thus, Song Dynasty scholar Zhu Xi, based on Kong Yingda’s interpretation, elevated his own understanding of “zhong” in temperament from inner human nature to the level of Heavenly Principle. He pointed out the origin of Heavenly Principle is “zhong”. This is also a concrete manifestation of the Song Dynasty scholars who study deeply in Neo-Confucianism (*Lixue* 理學) and emphasized the principles of the classics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the understanding of “zhong” in the opening chapter in the Doctrine of the Mean, has expressed a clear evolution trail in the interpretations of Han Dynasty Zheng Xuan and Tang Dynasty Kong Yingda and Song dynasty scholar Zhu Xi.

¹⁴ Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu*, p. 26.

The great foundation, both the nature of the Mandate of Heaven and the Principle of Heaven come from it. 大本者，天命之性，天下之理，皆由此出。

¹⁵ According to Pi Xirui 皮錫瑞 (1850-1908), *Jingxue lishi* 經學歷史 (JXCS ed.), there is a sentence that “Song dynasty Confucians arose to emphasize principles and meanings. 宋儒起而言義理。”

¹⁶ Zhu Xi, *Sishu jizhu*, p. 26.

The heaven and earth and all of the things actually are the whole with us, if one’s heart is in proper order, the heart of heaven and earth also maintains its proper order. 蓋天地萬物本吾一體，吾之心正，則天地之心亦正矣。

Zheng Xuan was rooted in the Han academic atmosphere that master the classics for practical application and believed that “zhong” is the origin of the external ritual system and political teaching, so the focus of his interpretation is on the outside society, this can embody the way of research classics that was very practical during the Han Dynasty. Tang Dynasty scholar Kong Yingda based on the Zheng Xuan’s exegesis of the words, turned the focus of interpretation from the external propriety to the inner human nature, and he pointed out the origin of human nature is “zhong”. So his interpretation not only inherited the words’ exegesis of the Han scholars, but also was a transition for the later interpretations’ development of the Song scholars.

Because during the Song Dynasty, Zhu Xi based on the Kong Yingda’s interpretation of the human nature, he further delved inward and upward, put the focus of interpretation in the Heavenly Principle level, pointed the origin of Heavenly Principle is “zhong”, and it is an embodiment of the way of study classics during the Song Dynasty which focus on the principles of classics.

Thus, from the Zheng Xuan’s “zhong” as the ritual norm, to the Kong Yingda’s “zhong” as human nature, then to the Zhu Xi’s “zhong” as Heavenly Principle. It can be seen that from Han Dynasty to Song Dynasty, scholars’ interpretation of the term “zhong” in temperament in the first chapter of *the Doctrine of the Mean*, have evolved from external ritual systems to internal human nature, and then to the Heavenly Principle, constantly towards inward and upward.

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